

The Influence of Internationalization, Marketing Capabilities, and Export Assistance on Export Performance in the Roots and Tubers Sector of Costa Rica*

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Abstract: The export performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is a driver of socio-economic development in developing countries. Despite the limitations they face in technology, performance, and human and financial resources, many of them seek opportunities in international markets. This study aims to fill the gap in understanding the drivers that promote export performance of SMEs in emerging economies by evaluating the influence of the level of internationalization, marketing capabilities, and export assistance on export performance. The internationalization process was analyzed from a strategic perspective using resource-based view (RBV) and network approaches. A descriptive and quantitative study was conducted using an online survey administered to roots and tubers (R & T) export companies in Costa Rica. The results demonstrated a significant positive influence of company size, managerial marketing, and market diversification on export performance. Additionally, a significant negative influence of the level of internationalization on export performance was found. The findings of this study have managerial and policy implications for export managers and policymakers to implement proactive strategies effectively that increase SMEs export performance in developing countries and reduce barriers to their international expansion. Further studies are required to obtain greater robustness of the proposed model and identify significant effects.

Keywords: Export assistance, export performance, internationalization, marketing capabilities, roots and tubers.

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Influencia de la internacionalización, las capacidades de marketing y la asistencia técnica sobre el desempeño exportador del sector de raíces y tubérculos de Costa Rica

Resumen: el desempeño exportador de las pymes es motor de progreso socioeconómico en los países en vía de desarrollo. A pesar de las limitaciones que enfrentan las pymes en cuanto a tecnología, desempeño y recursos humanos y financieros, muchas de ellas buscan oportunidades en los mercados internacionales. Este estudio tiene como objetivo llenar un vacío en la comprensión de los factores que promueven el desempeño exportador de las pymes en economías emergentes, evaluando la influencia del nivel de internacionalización, las capacidades de marketing y la asistencia técnica para la exportación sobre dicho desempeño. El proceso de internacionalización se analizó desde una perspectiva estratégica, utilizando la teoría basada en recursos y los enfoques de redes. Se llevó a cabo un estudio descriptivo y cuantitativo mediante una encuesta en línea a empresas exportadoras del sector de raíces y tubérculos de Costa Rica. Los resultados demostraron una influencia positiva significativa del tamaño de la empresa, la gestión de marketing y la diversificación de mercados en el desempeño exportador. Además, se identificó una influencia negativa significativa del nivel de internacionalización sobre el desempeño exportador. Los hallazgos de este estudio buscan generar reflexiones pertinentes para que los gerentes de exportación y los responsables de la formulación de políticas públicas implementen estrategias proactivas que permitan incrementar el desempeño exportador de las pymes en los países en desarrollo, reduciendo así las barreras que frenan su expansión en el escenario internacional. Se requieren estudios adicionales para obtener una mayor robustez del modelo propuesto e identificar efectos significativos adicionales a los presentados en este trabajo.

Palabras clave: asistencia para la exportación, desempeño exportador, internacionalización, capacidades de marketing, raíces y tubérculos.

A influência da internacionalização, capacidades de marketing e assistência à exportação no desempenho das exportações no setor de raízes e tubérculos da Costa Rica

Resumo: O desempenho das exportações de pequenas e médias empresas (PMEs) é um motor do desenvolvimento socioeconômico nos países em desenvolvimento. Apesar das limitações que enfrentam em tecnologia, desempenho e recursos humanos e financeiros, muitas delas buscam oportunidades nos mercados internacionais. Este estudo visa preencher a lacuna na compreensão dos fatores que promovem o desempenho das exportações das PMEs nas economias emergentes, a partir da avaliação da influência do nível de internacionalização, das capacidades de marketing e da assistência à exportação no desempenho das exportações. O processo de internacionalização foi analisado a partir de uma perspectiva estratégica usando visão baseada em recursos (RBV, na sigla em inglês) e abordagens de rede. Um estudo descritivo e quantitativo foi realizado por meio de uma pesquisa on-line realizada com empresas exportadoras de raízes e tubérculos (R&T) na Costa Rica. Os resultados demonstraram influência positiva significativa do tamanho da empresa, do marketing gerencial e da diversificação de mercado no desempenho das exportações. Além disso, foi encontrada uma influência negativa significativa do nível de internacionalização no desempenho das exportações. Os resultados deste estudo têm implicações gerenciais e políticas para os gerentes de exportação e formuladores de políticas implementarem estratégias proativas de forma eficaz que aumentem o desempenho das exportações das PMEs nos países em desenvolvimento e reduzam as barreiras à sua expansão internacional. Mais estudos são necessários para obter maior robustez do modelo proposto e identificar efeitos significativos.

Palavras-chave: assistência à exportação, desempenho das exportações, internacionalização, capacidades de marketing, raízes e tubérculos.

Introduction

The globalization of markets and global trends indicate that the business environment is constantly changing, compelling companies to access new, increasingly open, and dynamic markets, making exports fundamental to countries. This motivates many companies to penetrate international markets. Particularly for companies in emerging economies, exporting represents an excellent opportunity to expand their markets and increase profitability while overcoming intense domestic competition and exploiting opportunities for additional sales (Losilla *et al.*, 2019a; Özdemir *et al.*, 2017). Emerging economies are defined as low- and middle-income countries experiencing rapid economic growth and undergoing an institutional transition towards market-based economies. Among their main advantages are frugal innovation, process efficiency, differential access to resources, institutional flexibility, and government support (Gammeltoft & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2021).

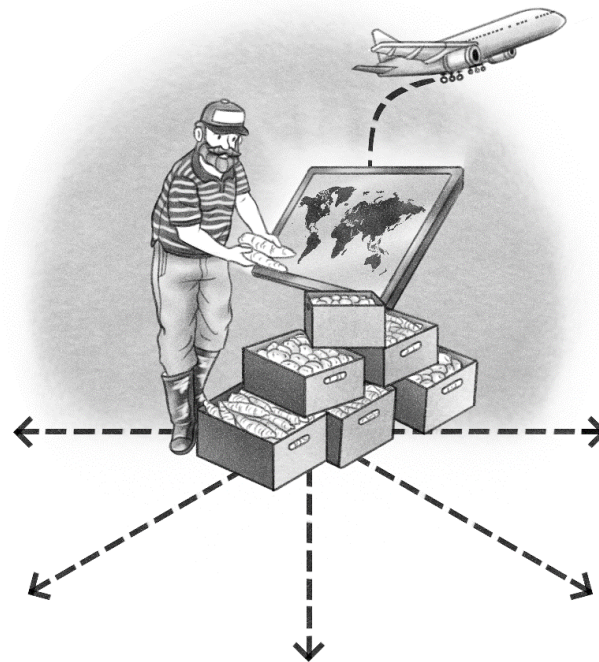
Emerging economies are important in terms of economic size, continued international advancement, innovation, and global governance. Besides, they comprise most of the world's population, biodiversity, natural resources and land mass (Gammeltoft & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2021). Seven of the twenty countries with the largest foreign direct investment outflows in 2019 were emerging economies (UNCTAD, 2020).

Export performance is crucial for governments due to its contribution to economic growth, improvement of productivity, strengthening of national industries, and creation of new jobs (Czinkota, 1994; Diamantopoulos, 1999). This impact is achieved not only through exports but also through foreign direct investment. To maintain competitiveness both domestically and internationally, companies increasingly require market share, technology, branding, and distribution networks in global markets (Gammeltoft & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2021). This is particularly relevant for SMEs, given their fundamental role in the socio-economic development of most countries (Özdemir *et al.*, 2017; Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004; Senik *et al.*, 2011).

SMEs in developing countries face numerous limitations in the internationalization process, including technological, administrative, and financial constraints, which reduce their ability to acquire export-related information (Cavusgil & Knight, 2009; Falahat *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, understanding the drivers that promote companies' export performance is key to their international competitiveness. The extent to which companies leverage their level of internationalization, marketing capabilities, and access to export assistance reflects their resource endowment, which is expected to enhance their export performance.

Most studies on the internationalization of SMEs and their impact on export performance have been conducted in developed countries (Casillas *et al.*, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2020; Papadopoulos & Martín, 2010), with limited information on the internationalization of companies in emerging economies from Latin America. Aulak *et al.* (2000) examined the export strategies of companies and their performance in international markets in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Bianchi (2014) studied

the internationalization of Chilean companies with a notable international presence. Losilla *et al.* (2019b) evaluated the effects of related product diversification on the export performance of companies in the Chilean fresh fruit sector. Tu and Thanh (2020) assessed the relationship between business barriers and the degree of internationalization in Peruvian companies. Senik *et al.* (2011) stated that the internationalization of SMEs in emerging economies depends on three interconnected networks: personal relationships, business associates, and government institutions.



Within such a setting, analyses internationalization from a strategic perspective, which includes theories suggesting that a company's objective in entering international markets is to create value. To achieve this, a company establishes a competitive strategy that determines how it will compete in the market, defining its goals and values (Porter, 2001). The main approaches to SME internationalization are the resource-based view (RBV) theory and the network approach. The RBV theory posits that companies competing in the same industry may have different results in their export performance depending on the quantity of tangible and intangible resources they possess (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984). The network approach offers a new perspective, asserting that networks are essential for SMEs to develop their limited resources. This approach allows for a better understanding of the international entrepreneurial spirit of these companies (Aspelund *et al.*, 2007). The relationships established within networks are key to facilitating access to information and other resources, which are essential factors in the internationalization process of SMEs.

The aim of this study and, therefore, its contribution to the scientific literature is to provide a better understanding of the relationship between three main constructs that promote export

performance by SMEs in the R & T sector in Costa Rica. This study seeks to answer whether the level of internationalization, marketing capabilities, and export assistance influence export performance; thus becoming a pioneering study, as no previous work, to our knowledge, has considered the analysis of these three constructs together. For this study, a quantitative and descriptive method was employed, using a type of non-probability sampling. Data collection was conducted via an online survey, utilizing a structured questionnaire divided into six sections.

The main contribution of this work is its analysis of the internationalization process of SMEs, based on the RBV and network approaches, and its understanding of the influence of marketing capabilities and export assistance on export performance. This strategic perspective differs from traditional economic, innovation, and process perspectives by placing resources, competences, and networks at the core of the analysis of SMEs, including essential characteristics of these companies. The contributions made should be of wide interest to policymakers, helping them understand the internationalization process of SMEs and providing a guide for designing and implementing effective marketing plans and national programs to promote internationalization. Additionally, export managers could gain a better understanding of the marketing strategies necessary to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in their export processes, thereby improving their performance and the development of business networks.

This paper is structured in six sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents the literature review and theoretical framework that supports our study, describing the internationalization process, the RBV and network approaches, marketing capabilities, and the role of export assistance. The third section outlines the methodology employed in this study. The fourth section describes the results obtained. The fifth section discusses the findings and contributions of this research. The final section presents the conclusions, limitations, and future research directions.

Literature review

The phenomenon of internationalization is complex, involving a wide range of mechanisms that companies use to enter international markets, each with different inputs and outputs (Andersson, 2004; Fletcher, 2001). Internationalization can be viewed as a process in which a company must adapt to offer its products abroad and integrate into international markets (Calof & Beamish, 1995). This process depends on the company's characteristics, including its human and technological capabilities, as well as business and organizational factors (Dhanaraj & Beamish, 2003).

Several elements can impede effective information exchange between companies and export markets, thereby hindering the internationalization process. These include physical distances, barriers, and borders (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Additionally, factors such as international economic relations, trade agreements, political and economic conflicts, and quality and phytosanitary regulations significantly influence export sales and resource allocation (Özdemir *et al.*, 2017).

The internationalization of companies in their early stages—referred to in the literature as born globals, international new ventures, or first internationalizers—has attracted significant research attention in recent years (Cavusgil & Knight, 2009; Jantunen *et al.*, 2008; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007). These companies exhibit an international business orientation or entrepreneurial spirit that drives them to explore and pursue international opportunities. As a result, they enter foreign markets to achieve their organizational objectives, often accepting a high level of risk (Cavusgil & Knight, 2009; Jantunen *et al.*, 2008).

Rugman and Verbeke (2003) are considered the authors of the new theory of internationalization, which emphasizes the need to model a company's internal organization and network capabilities, in addition to focusing on specific advantages such as strengths in R&D, technology, and branding creation. Johanson and Mattson (1988) conceptualized internationalization in terms of connections developed through trade with other countries across three stages: i) forming networks with partners from other countries (prolongation); ii) increasing interaction and engagement within those networks (penetration); and iii) integrating network connections across different countries (integration). The development of technological, commercial, and financial relationships with network counterparts allows companies to gradually expand their activities and relationships from their domestic territory to international markets (Laghzaoui, 2011). Internationalization involves leveraging the competitive advantage that networks offer, with network relationships being crucial for accessing progressive learning, knowledge, and other resources.

The RBV is a theoretical approach, based on competitive advantage, that analyses the diversity of companies. This approach allows us to see the company not merely as a collection of activities but as a combination of tangible (financial, physical, and legal) and intangible (human, organizational, informational, and relational) resources (Porter, 2001). The RBV is grounded in two key assumptions about resources: they are heterogeneous and they are immobile. This means that resources, capabilities, and competencies vary from one company to another. The ability to effectively combine and transform resources into a competitive advantage distinguishes companies from one another. Furthermore, resources are not easily transferable and cannot be moved from one company to another in the short term. The RBV posits that a sustained competitive advantage is achieved only when resources possess four attributes: i) they are valuable, ii) they are rare, iii) they are inimitable, and iv) they can be effectively exploited by the company (Barney, 1991).

The network approach considers inter- and intra- organizational networks. The main network types are social networks, business networks and institutional networks (Oparaocha, 2015). The internationalization process of SMEs from a networks perspective has been studied in the past. Coviello and Munro (1997) demonstrated that through networks relationships companies are able to internationalize quickly by linking themselves to networks and externalizing their activities. Johanson and Mattsson (1988) showed that as companies internationalize, the number of actors with whom they interact in the network increases and relationships with them become closer.

Certain studies have revealed both significant positive and negative influences of internationalization on export performance. Some research indicates a positive influence (Papadopoulos & Martín, 2010), while others show a negative effect (Casillas *et al.*, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2020). However, according to Boehe and Jiménez (2016) and Losilla *et al.* (2019b), internationalization provides greater access to resources, reduces market risks, enhances market power, and facilitates learning effects and the creation and development of business relationships. In line with the RBV perspective, these factors contribute to improved performance.

Given this information it is possible to hypothesize *H1*: There is a positive relationship between internationalization and export performance.

Marketing capabilities contribute to the performance of companies by allowing them to develop and implement value creation strategies and benefit from the resources they possess (Morgan *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, marketing capabilities allow companies to manage their resources and carry out actions aligned with marketing strategies and develop programs to implement them (Day, 1994). Several empirical studies have examined the relationship between export performance and marketing capabilities (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Hult *et al.*, 2005; Katsikeas *et al.*, 2006; Morgan *et al.*, 2012; Zou *et al.*, 2003). In the case of born global companies, it has been demonstrated that marketing capabilities integrated with the use of internet may reduce export barriers, overcoming obstacles of size, novelty and penetration in the overseas markets (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2013; Wang, 2020; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007).

Marketing capabilities can be defined as integrative processes that allow companies to offer planned value proposals to target customers through the implementation of resources (Day, 1994; Vorhies & Morgan, 2003). This includes using collective knowledge, skills and resources owned by the company to satisfy its needs in the foreign market, allowing the company to adapt to market conditions, take advantage of market opportunities, and face competitive threats in a better way. The better companies understand the characteristics of the international environment, the more effectively they can develop their international competitiveness. While this process may be costly and time-consuming, the resulting benefits can be extremely significant once achieved (Kayabasi & Mtetwa, 2016).

The theory of marketing capabilities distinguishes between two types of capabilities: architectural and specialized. The synergy between these capabilities can have significant effects, as evidenced by the literature (Vorhies & Morgan, 2003). Architectural capabilities refer to the ability of an export company to learn about the risks associated with export markets and to leverage this knowledge to make informed decisions regarding export marketing strategies. This includes the collection, processing, and interpretation of market information to guide the development and coordination of export marketing strategies. Specialized capabilities, on the other hand, involve the processes necessary to develop and implement marketing programs, including product development, marketing communications, sales, pricing, distribution, and services (Vorhies & Morgan, 2003).

Several studies have demonstrated that companies can achieve better performance in international markets through the implementation of marketing strategies (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Hult *et al.*, 2005; Katsikeas *et al.*, 2006; Morgan *et al.*, 2012; Prasad *et al.*, 2001; Zou *et al.*, 2003), while others have not found significant results (Kayabasi & Mtetwa, 2016). In accordance with the RBV and networks approaches, it is expected that marketing capabilities will allow companies i) to increase the ability to implement a product market strategy that leads to better business performance; ii) to prevent imitation and substitution; and iii) to maintain the performance advantages obtained (Day, 1994).

Consequently, it can be stated that *H2*: Marketing capabilities has a positive significant relationship on export performance.

Studies have shown that companies may make the most of their internal resources when using government assistance programs, showing greater development and progress in export performance compared to companies that do not make use of these resources (Wilkinson, 2006). Export assistance programs represent available external sources of information, knowledge and experience which provide companies with capacities to deal with the complexities of exports (Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001). These programs are political initiatives that aim to help exporters conduct international business, being a platform to support the internationalization of companies (Ahmad, 2010; Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001; Seringhaus & Rosson, 1990). Therefore, it represents a mechanism that helps companies to reduce barriers to their international expansion (Lages & Montgomery, 2005). Export assistance can be classified into three categories: i) informational, ii) experiential (Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001), and iii) financial assistance (Seringhaus, 1986).

Informational assistance consists of support provided by assistance agencies, such as training or courses on regulations and certifications. Experiential assistance is achieved through personal interactions facilitated by government agencies, such as organizing trips abroad, participating in international trade missions, and attending national and international trade fairs (Kotabe & Czinkota, 1992). This type of assistance allows exporters to establish direct contact with potential foreign clients, thereby understanding their needs and adapting their products or services accordingly. Such assistance is particularly valuable for companies in developing countries, which may face human and financial constraints that limit their ability to travel abroad to explore markets firsthand, evaluate production technologies, and identify quality standards and product delivery requirements (Leonidou *et al.*, 2011). Export financial assistance includes both direct and indirect financial incentives, such as tax reductions, export incentives, access to export bank loans at lower rates than market rates, and import/export tariff provisions (Faroque & Takahashi, 2015).

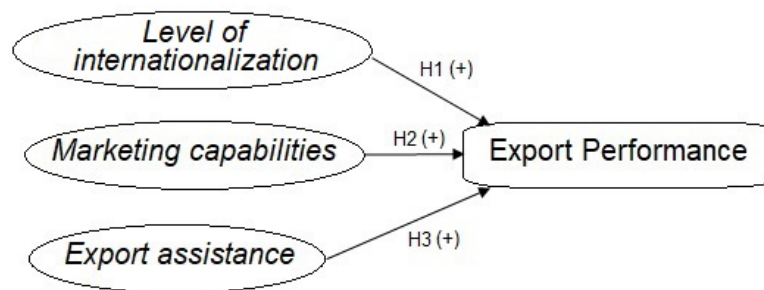
Informational and experiential assistance has been shown to have a significant effect on the internationalization of companies (Ahmad, 2010; Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001; Lages & Montgomery, 2004; Sousa & Bradley, 2009). In contrast, other empirical studies have shown no significant relationship between export assistance and export performance (Faroque & Takahashi, 2015).

Government export assistance programs provide companies with relevant market information, skills development, and resources they need to develop export strategies and achieve better performance (Ahmad, 2010; Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001; Lages & Montgomery, 2004; Sousa & Bradley, 2009). Thus, export assistance represents an important factor for the success of SMEs internationalization.

Based on these findings and consistent with the rbv and networks theories, it can be hypothesized that H3: There is a positive relationship between export assistance and export performance.

According to the previous approaches, figure 1 shows the proposed conceptual model.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study.



Source: authors.

The Costa Rican Foreign Trade Promotion Agency (PROCOMER, in Spanish) is one of the government organizations that supports exports in Costa Rica. Created in 1996, PROCOMER is dedicated to providing technical and financial support to the Ministry of Foreign Trade (COMEX) to administer special regimes from export. Its export promotion assistance activities are focused on helping Costa Rican companies to promote local products and thus increase their exports by facilitating connections between potential buyers and exporters (PROCOMER, 2023). PROCOMER has more than 40 commercial promotion offices around the world in order to creating a secure and efficient link between international buyers and Costa Rican exporters. It has built a solid foreign trade platform, which includes agreements with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Central American Integration, as well as thirteen free trade agreements (FTA), which cover about 80% of the country's international trade, in addition to association agreements between Central America and the European Union and bilateral investment agreements with other 14 countries (PROCOMER, 2023).

Particularly in the R & T sector, some exporters belong to the Chamber of Roots and Tubers Exporters of Costa Rica (CERYT), established in 2017. This chamber supports export companies by implementing actions aimed at increasing productivity and competitiveness. CERYT focuses on three key areas: primary production, enhancing the competitiveness of export companies, and international projection (CERYT, 2020). This third area includes strategies such as the creation of

cookbooks and recipes with professional chefs, cooking shows in supermarkets in destination countries, participation in international fairs, development of product catalogs, production of promotional videos, B2B strategies, packaging innovation, and country brand promotion.

Given this context, the R & T sector in Costa Rica represents an interesting case for studying the impact of export assistance programs on the export performance of SMEs.

Methodology

The study was conducted with export companies in the roots and tubers (R & T) sector from Costa Rica between May and June 2021. A quantitative and descriptive method was employed. Data were collected using an online survey, which included a structured questionnaire designed in Spanish. The questionnaire comprised 65 multiple-choice, closed, and open-ended questions, organized into six sections: i) characteristics of the company, ii) market diversification, iii) level of internationalization, iv) marketing capabilities, v) export assistance, and vi) export performance.

The target population was 59 R & T export companies, of which 30 belong to CERYT. The remaining companies were contacted through secondary information and internet search. This sample is considered a representative sample of the sector, given that the 30 export companies belonging to CERYT represent 80% of Costa Rica's R & T exports.

Costa Rica occupies an important place in the international markets of R & T being the fourth exporter in importance of cassava worldwide and the main supplier of fresh cassava to the United States (Trade Map, 2021). In 2019, Costa Rica exported USD 96 million of cassava products, corresponding to 62% fresh cassava and 38% frozen cassava. The United States is the main market for Costa Rican cassava exports (65%), followed by the Netherlands (12%), Spain (7%), and the United Kingdom (5%). From 2015 to 2019, cassava exports (million USD) grew by 37.1 % (PROCOMER, 2020). The positioning of the Costa Rican R & T sector in the international world market has been among some reasons thanks to the Costa Rica's strategic geographic location and good commercial relations that the country has with North America and Europe. Additionally, the sector has successfully leveraged its comparative advantages to develop differentiated products that offer benefits such as convenience, ease of preparation (e.g., pre-cut, pre-cooked), and gluten-free options to African and Latin American immigrant communities. This explains why this sector was chosen for empirical analysis as the research context.

Data collection

The questionnaire for data collection was created using Google Forms. A link to the survey was digitally distributed to all exporters. The questionnaire was reviewed through in-depth

discussions with two academic researchers specializing in international marketing research and evaluated by three experts in the R & T export sector from Costa Rica, who served as expert judges. The form underwent a pre-test and refinement through a pilot test conducted with managers from two R & T export companies.

After two weeks, a reminder was issued via telephone. A total of 33 completed questionnaires were received, yielding an effective response rate of 55.9%. This response rate is considered high compared to the average response rate of 19% in online survey studies within business settings (Healey *et al.*, 2002). The sampling method used was non-probabilistic. Following the codification and review of the database, two responses were excluded because they did not pertain to export companies, resulting in a final sample of 31 eligible questionnaires.

Variables

The explained variable in this study is export performance, measured as the volume of exports per year, which, according to Losilla *et al.* (2019b), turns out to be the only real measurement of performance at an observed output level. In a similar way, Morgan *et al.* (2012) and Prasad *et al.* (2001) used this same variable to measure export performance.

In this study, the explanatory variables included the level of internationalization, marketing capabilities, and export assistance. These variables were measured as multi-item constructs, incorporating a total of 23 items derived from prior research. These items were used to define and analyze the constructs in the study (Ahmad, 2010; Faroque & Takahashi, 2015; Prasad *et al.*, 2001). The groups of variables used are shown in Table 1.

Additionally, two control variables were included: the number of permanent employees to control for company size, and the number of company processes to control for market diversification. Research indicates that company size plays a fundamental role in determining export performance (Bonaccorsi, 1992; Calof, 1994; Lipuma *et al.*, 2013). Market diversification is also recognized as a crucial driver of economic growth, depending on exporters' ability to introduce new products, enter new markets, and maintain business relationships. Some studies have assessed the impact of market diversification on export performance and have found significant results (Bhavan, 2017; Denis & Depelteau, 1985).

Table 1. Determination of constructs and items included in the study.

Construct	Item	Measure sources
Level of internationalization	Years of export activity, international customers, export countries destination, number of certifications	Adapted from Berbel and Ramírez (2017), Aulak <i>et al.</i> (2000), Faroque and Takahashi (2015).

Construct	Item	Measure sources
Marketing capabilities	Holding website, digital products catalogue, communications with customers by website, number of social networks, internet transactions, marketing staff, marketing investment, marketing activities	Adapted from Alarcón-del-Amo <i>et al.</i> (2016), Zou <i>et al.</i> (2003), Cassetta <i>et al.</i> (2019), Morgan <i>et al.</i> (2012), Bianchi and Mathews (2016), Prasad <i>et al.</i> (2001)
Export assistance	Membership to CERYT, CERYT benefits, CERYT trainings, presence in PROCOMER catalogue, attendance at international fairs promoted by PROCOMER, customers contact through PROCOMER, attendance at trainings, number of trainings promoted by PROCOMER	Adapted from Leonidou <i>et al.</i> (2002), Ahmad (2010), Faroque and Takahashi (2015)
Export performance	Volume of exports per year	Adapted from Morgan <i>et al.</i> (2012), Prasad <i>et al.</i> (2001), Losilla <i>et al.</i> (2019b)

Source: authors based on the literature review.

Analytical method

In this study, hierarchical linear regression modeling was utilized using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20. This model allows for the evaluation of the contingency of the hypotheses. A strategy of adding variables to the model was employed to observe the increase in variation, as indicated by the change in R^2 from one model to another. Regression analysis was used to interpret the impact of each independent variable in relation to the other variables in the model. The variance inflation factor (VIF) value was determined to rule out any potential threat of multicollinearity.

In order to build the constructs used as explanatory variables, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were employed. According to Hair *et al.* (2014), these methods reduce a set of interrelated items to a more manageable size while maintaining the original information. The selection of these analytical methods was based on a literature review of export performance studies (table 2).

Table 2. Research on export performance literature.

Topic	Statistical analysis	Exemplar studies
Determinants of export performance	efa, cfa	Carneiro <i>et al.</i> (2011), Aulakh <i>et al.</i> (2000), Berbel and Ramirez (2017)
Effect of marketing capabilities on export performance	EFA, CFA, path model	Zou <i>et al.</i> (2003), Morgan <i>et al.</i> (2012), Kayabaşı and Mtetwa (2016), Prasad <i>et al.</i> (2001), Lages and Montgomery (2004)
Effect of digital technologies on export market growth	Binary probit regression models, factor analysis, structural equation modelling (SEM), EFA	Cassetta <i>et al.</i> (2019), Bianchi and Mathews (2016), Mathews <i>et al.</i> (2016), Mahmoud <i>et al.</i> (2020), Tajvidi and Karami (2021), Alarcón-del-Amo <i>et al.</i> (2016)

Topic	Statistical analysis	Exemplar studies
Effect of export assistance on export performance	EFA, CFA, latent moderated structural equations, hierarchical regression modelling	Wang <i>et al.</i> (2017), Faroque and Takahashi (2015), Sousa and Bradley (2009)

Source: authors based on the literature review.

To ensure the suitability of the factor scale, an evaluation of its validity and consistency was conducted, which is essential for confirming a measurement model. A good rule of thumb is that the measure of sampling adequacy, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, must exceed 0.50 for both the overall test and each individual variable. The lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is 0.7, although it can decrease to 0.6 in exploratory research (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, to measure construct validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) and construct reliability (CR) were determined. These values were estimated using the formulas suggested by Fornell and Larckers (1981).

The model used in this study is given by:

Exp. Vol = α + β_1 permanent employees + β_2 company processes + β_3 level of internationalization + β_4 managerial marketing

Results

The sample of respondents included 31 export companies of R & T, of which 25.8% are micro companies, 64.5% are SMES, and only 9.7% are large exporters. The Costa Rican Social Security Fund classifies companies in terms of size as micro-enterprises (1-5 workers), small (6-30), medium-sized (31-100), and large (more than 100) (Brenes, 2019). Most of the companies in the sample are based in the province of Alajuela (74.2%). The nationality of the company owners is predominantly Costa Rican (87.1%), with 51.6% having university degrees and 29.0% having completed high school. The positions held by the respondents in the company are as follows: general manager (54.8%), operations manager (commercial, production, logistics, exports) (25.8%), and administrative staff (19.4%).

Regarding the *origin of raw materials*, 87.1% of exporters commercialize domestically produced raw materials. Only four companies purchase foreign raw materials, which represent around 20% of their stock. The study showed that only one company produces all the products it sells. Additionally, 22.6% of companies export more than 70% of the products they produce, 16.1% export products that come from 40-70% of their own operations, 41.9% export products from 5-20% of their own production, and 19.3% of the companies purchase 100% of their raw materials from external producers.

Concerning the *operational characteristics of the company*, 77.4% use semi-mechanized technology, 3.2% use automated technology, and 19.4% rely on manual processes. The results show that 58.1% of export companies are producers as well, 6.4% are only processors, 25.8% are only packers, and 9.7% are only traders. The main processes carried out by the companies are paraffin (employed by 80.6% of the exporters) and frozen (employed by 38.7%). The results demonstrated that for 93.5% of the sample, R & T exports represent on average 60% of their total exports, being the most important products in their portfolio. Only two companies focus their exports on other products: one on pineapple and the other on chayote. Among the R & T exported, cassava ranks first for all exporters, representing on average 64.5% of their total exports. The results demonstrated that 45.2% of companies have between 5-10 products within their product portfolio and 35.5% more than 10 products.

In terms of *level of internationalization*, 48.4% of the companies have on average 15 years of export activity. Regarding the number of clients, 22.6% of the companies have two international customers, while 32.2% have more than five. It is important to highlight that 74.4% of the companies are considered "born global" because they started exporting from the beginning of their creation or within at least three years after. Their production is focused on international markets. The results show that 22.8% of companies export to one single country and the same share export to five or more countries. The preferred export country destination of all companies is the United States (100%), followed by Canada (77.4%), the Netherlands (48.4%), and Spain (29%).

The *number of certifications* is an important variable because it may be considered as an entry barrier for some international markets. In this regard, 41.9% of the companies have at least one certification and 9.7% do not have any (figure 2). The most frequent certification is the FDA Approved (held by 51.6% of the exporters), followed by GlobalGAP (29%), and Global Food Safety GFS (25.8%).

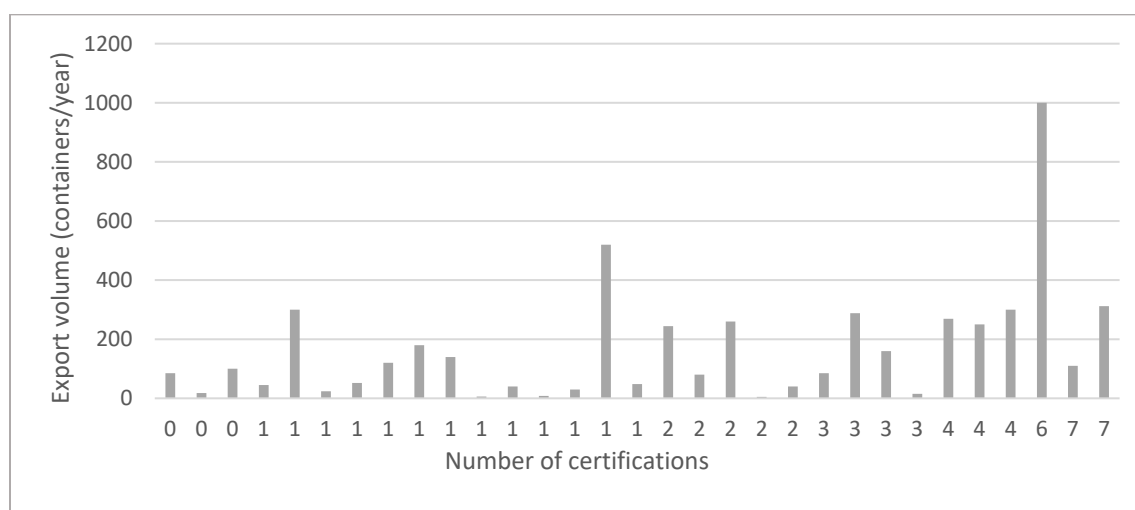
The results showed that 38.7% of the companies have experienced export rejections in the last three years. The main causes cited were quality problems (such as high humidity and product color change), sanitary and phytosanitary measures due to product contamination with insects, shipping failures, and improper container handling. On average, these rejections represented 10.5% of the total exports.

Regarding the *main form of communication with customers*, 41.9% of companies use email, 41.9% WhatsApp, and 16.1% telephone. The main languages are Spanish, used by 71% of companies, and English (29%). The results showed that 96.8% of the companies carry out online transactions mainly for payment of services, banking transactions and input purchases. It is noted that 45.2% make sales online.

As for *marketing capabilities*, 54.8% of companies carry out marketing activities. The most common activities include visits to international clients, creating brochures or catalogues, and

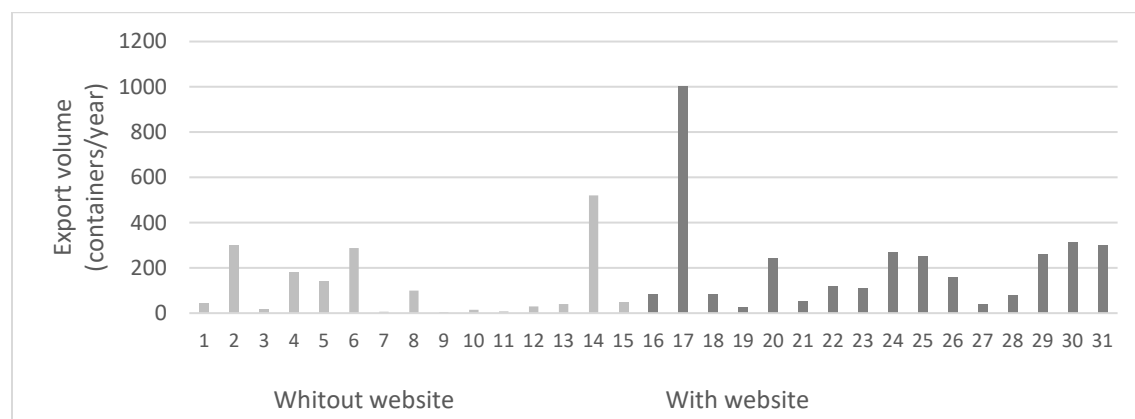
producing promotional videos. During 2020, 90.3% of the companies did not intensify their digital marketing efforts. The results also showed that 51.6% of the export companies have a website (figure 3). These companies export an average of 211.9 containers per year, compared to an average of 116.2 containers per year exported by companies without a website. A T-test was performed to determine the statistical significance of the difference in the mean export volumes between these two groups of companies. The means were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). It was observed that 62.5% of the companies with a website export more than 100 containers per year.

Figure 2. Export volume of R & T per year according to the number of certifications.



Source: authors.

Figure 3. Export volume of R & T according to website ownership.



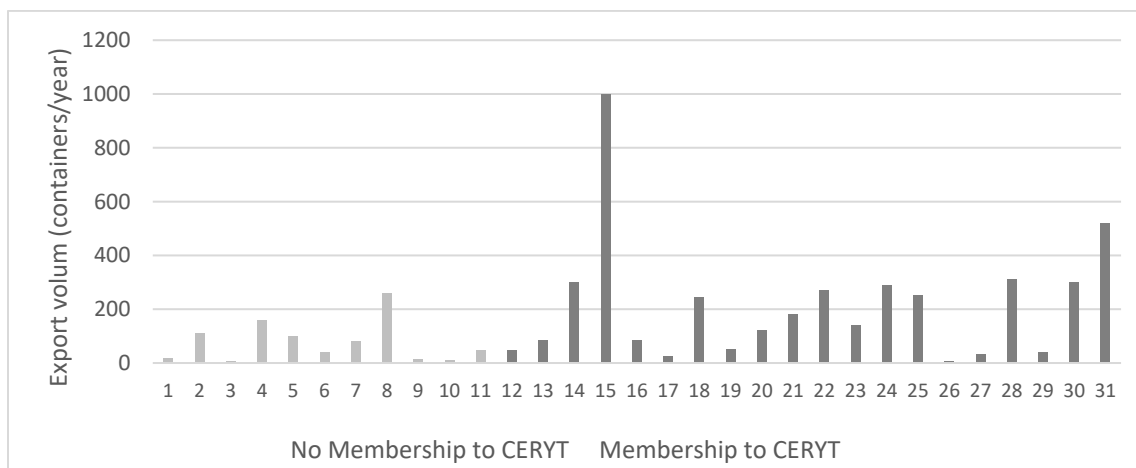
Source: authors.

In addition, 35.5% of the exporters have a digital products catalogue, 38.7% receive communications from customers through their website, and 45.2% use social networks. The most

popular social networks used by these companies are Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Additionally, 19.3% of companies have a person dedicated to business marketing. However, 61.3% of the companies do not invest in or include marketing costs in their total costs.

As for *CERYT's export assistance*, 64.5% of the export companies have membership to CERYT and export on average 214.4 containers per year, significantly higher in comparison to the 76.8 containers exported on average per year by those companies that do not have a CERYT membership. The means were significantly different ($\text{sig} < 0.05$). In addition, 75% of the CERYT associates actively participate in the chamber's WhatsApp social network; that is, they receive and send messages. Moreover, 51.6% attend training promoted by CERYT. It was found that 60% of these companies export above 100 containers/year, as shown in figure 4.

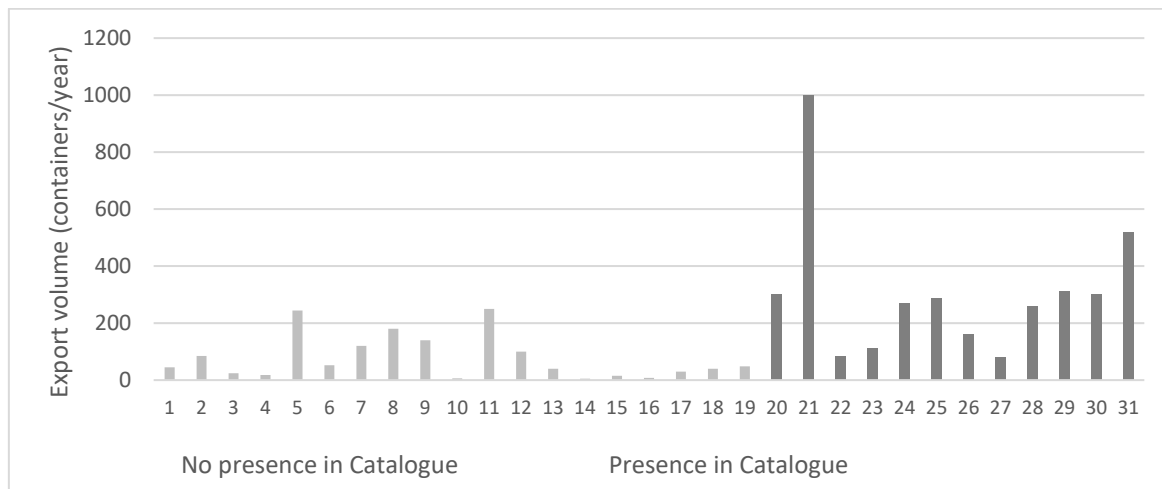
Figure 4. Export volume of R & T according to the membership to CERYT.



Source: authors.

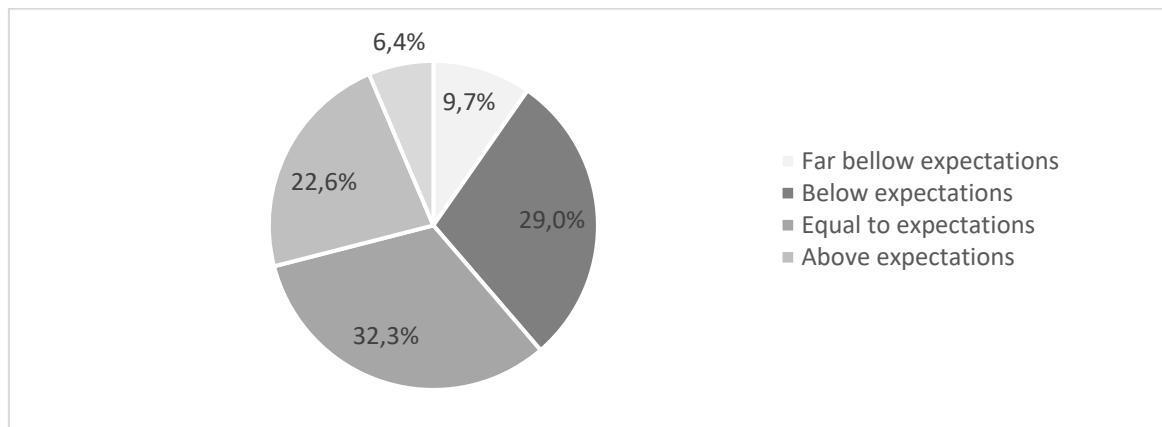
Regarding the *PROCOMER's export assistance*, the results demonstrated that 38.7% have presence in PROCOMER catalogue, 70.9% attend to trainings promoted by PROCOMER and 64.5% of the exporters have participated in international fairs promoted by PROCOMER. In addition, 54.8% mentioned having contacted potential customers through PROCOMER in the last two years. On average, the total number of training sessions that export companies receive from CERYT and PROCOMER is seven per year. The study shown that the export companies that have presence in PROCOMER's catalogue exported on average 307 containers on average per year, which is significantly higher than the 76.3 containers on average per year exported by those companies that do not have presence in the PROCOMER catalogue. The means was significantly different ($\text{sig} < 0.01$). It was noted that 66.7% of the export companies who have presence in PROCOMER catalogue have exports above 250 containers/year (figure 5).

Figure 5. R & T export volumes according to companies' presence in PROCOMER catalogue.



Source: authors.

Figure 6. Profits of R & T export companies in 2020.



Source: authors.

Regarding *export performance*, measured as export volume in the last year, 54.8% of the companies exported between 1-100 containers per year and 9.7% more than 300 containers. As shown in Figure 6—contrary to what might have been expected due to border closures during the global conjuncture caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020—the profits of 32.3% of the examined companies met their expectations, 29.0% reported profits below their expectations, and 22.6% reported profits above their expectations.

The EFA results for the construct level of internationalization showed an acceptable measure of sampling adequacy ($\kappa_{MO} = 0.679$). However, the factor-loading significance of the item "years of export activity" was not significant (0.134), and its Cronbach's alpha was 0.469. Consequently, this item was removed. After performing the CFA with the remaining three items, the κ_{MO} value was

0.696, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), and the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.535. All the statistical loadings of the items on the factors ranged from 0.8 to 0.9 (table 3).

Table 3. Components extracted from CFA.

Construct/ item	Standardized factor loadings			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Level of internationalization (0.696, 0.535, 0.900, 0.751)				
Export countries destination	0.900			
International customers	0.884			
Certifications	0.814			
Digital marketing (0.729, 0.883, 0.927, 0.809)				
Website		0.924		
Communication using website		0.899		
Digital products catalogue		0.876		
Managerial marketing (0.630, 0.544, 0.812, 0.591)				
Marketing activities			0.824	
Marketing investment			0.767	
Marketing staff			0.712	
Export assistance (0.695, 0.808, 0.875, 0.637)				
Contact of customers				0.900
Attendance at trainings				0.777
Participation in international fairs				0.757
Presence in catalogue				0.750

Note: (KMO, Cronbach α , CR, AVE).

Source: authors.

The EFA for the construct marketing capabilities showed a $KMO = 0.701$, Bartlett's test of sphericity significant ($\text{sig.} < 0.001$), and Cronbach's alpha = 0.582. All statistical loads varied between 0.7-0.9. The rotated component matrix revealed a clear separation into two correlated components. The first component, comprising the items web page, digital products catalogue, and communications with customers through the website, was labeled "digital marketing." The second component, consisting of the items marketing staff, marketing investment, and marketing activities, was labeled "managerial marketing." The items use of social networks and Internet transactions were discarded due to their low factor loadings (below the theoretical limit). Performing the CFA showed a KMO value of 0.717, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), and Cronbach's alpha was 0.627.

The EFA results for export assistance construct showed a $KMO = 0.701$, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\text{sig.} < 0.001$), but the measure of consistency in the factor item scale was not supported by Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.369$. Since the consistency in the scale of the factor items was not supported, the number of items was reduced by eliminating those with non-significant statistical loadings: number of PROCOMER trainings, membership to CERYT, CERYT benefits, and CERYT trainings. Performing the CFA on the revised set of variables resulted in a KMO value of 0.695, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), and Cronbach's α was 0.808. All statistical loadings ranged from 0.7 to 0.9. The calculated values for construct reliability and average variance extracted for all components were within the accepted range.

Table 4 shows the correlation matrix between the control variables, the four selected constructs (level of internationalization, digital marketing, managerial marketing and export assistance), and the explained variable export performance measured by the export volume per year. Even when some of the variables were significantly correlated, VIF values ranged between 1.100 and 5.622. Therefore, any potential threat of multicollinearity was dismissed.

Table 4. Correlation matrix.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Permanent employees	1						
2. Company processes	0.342	1					
3. Level of internationalization	0.771**	0.001	1				
4. Digital marketing	0.180	- 0.032	0.465**	1			
5. Managerial marketing	0.124	- 0.186	0.424*	0.263	1		
6. Export assistance	0.340	- 0.076	0.525**	0.362*	0.418*	1	
7. Export performance	0.715**	0.608**	0.451*	0.229	0.204	0.324	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Source: authors.

A hierarchical linear regression model was performed to evaluate the contingency of the hypotheses. Four different models showing the results for the inclusion of each construct individually are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Regression analysis.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Constant)	- 64.116	- 65.442	- 75.887	- 78.112
Permanent employees	0.952***	0.916**	1.340***	1.327***
Company processes	121.301***	123.437**	115.437**	117.527**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Level of internationalization (H1)		4.854	-77.303	-85.827*
Digital marketing (H2)			39.709	35.837
Managerial marketing (H2)			57.653**	51.423**
Export assistance (H3)				27.082
R ²	0.661	0.661	0.746	0.758
Change in R ²		0.000	0.085**	0.012
Fvalue	27.276	17.550	14.688**	12.549
Change in F		0.015	4.184	1.217

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001.

Source: authors.

Model 1 is the base model including only the control variables: permanent employees and company processes. Model 2 includes the addition of the construct level of internationalization. Model 3 adds the two constructs related to marketing capabilities: digital marketing and managerial marketing. Model 4 includes the construct export assistance.

Results from model 1 showed a positive relationship between both, permanent employees ($\beta = 0.952$, $p < 0.001$) and company processes ($\beta = 121.301$, $p < 0.001$) with export performance. Model 2 allowed the evaluation of hypothesis H1 that states a positive influence between level of internationalization and export performance, which was not supported by non-significant β value ($\beta = 4.854$, $p > 0.10$). As observed in table 5, the change in R² was not significant, so the addition of the variable does not affect model 1.

Model 3 allowed evaluating H2 that postulates a positive influence of marketing capabilities on export performance. The hypothesis is partially accepted, given that digital marketing variable had non-significant β value ($\beta = 39.709$, $p > 0.10$), while managerial marketing variable showed a significant β value ($\beta = 57.653$, $p < 0.05$). There is a significant change in R² from model 2 to model 3 (0.085, $p < 0.05$).

Finally, model 4 allowed testing hypothesis H3 that postulates a positive influence of export assistance on export performance, which was not supported by non-significant β values. However, results from Model 4 still support H1 and partially H2, given the significant β values obtained.

The results found for H1 in model 4 are consistent with the findings by Casillas *et al.* (2020), Kim *et al.* (2020), and Losilla *et al.* (2019b), who found evidence of a negative influence of the level of internationalization on export performance. Regarding the results obtained for H2 in Model 3 and 4, these coincide with the results obtained by Morgan *et al.* (2012), Zou *et al.* (2003), and Prasad *et al.* (2001). Finally, the results for H3 in Model 4 are consistent with the findings by

Faroque and Takahashi (2015), who identified no significant relationship between export assistance and export performance.

Discussion

The results indicate that firm size may influence the more efficient management of a company's resources. Aaby and Slater (1989) suggested that firm size could affect export performance and the support provided by export assistance agencies. Larger companies, with more resources, have a greater competitive advantage in international markets. Market diversification, measured by company processes, positively impacts export performance, aligning with the findings by Denis and Depelteau (1985) and Bhavan (2017). Knight and Cavusgil (2005) argue that born-global companies often use product differentiation strategies to gain a competitive advantage.

Regarding the negative relationship between the level of internationalization and export performance, similar findings have been reported by Casillas *et al.* (2020), Kim *et al.* (2020), and Losilla *et al.* (2019b), who found that the relationship between internationalization and company performance is U-shaped or inverted U-shaped. This indicates that varying levels of internationalization may yield either positive or negative results. Kim *et al.* (2020) noted that this negative impact often occurs in the initial stages of internationalization, where the benefits and transaction costs of internationalization may offset each other, a situation commonly faced by many born-global companies.

The study's findings highlight a positive impact of marketing capabilities, particularly managerial marketing, on export performance. This suggests that SMEs managers should focus on the management skills required to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage and enhance export performance. Additionally, a deeper understanding of network relationships and types is crucial for the internationalization process. While digital marketing constructs did not significantly influence export performance, previous studies (Wang, 2020) suggest that companies should manage accumulated data in complex customer relationship management systems for trend monitoring, market detection, decision-making, and strategy development to create a sustained competitive advantage.

The analysis did not find evidence of export assistance significantly influencing export performance, despite literature emphasizing that export assistance agencies help reduce barriers to internationalization (Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Seringhaus & Rosson, 1990). Firms must actively and committedly engage with export assistance to leverage its benefits for better performance. The lack of significant impact raises concerns about whether export assistance institutions are providing appropriate training and whether exporters are adequately engaged. It is essential for these institutions to assess the effectiveness of different types of assistance (informational, experiential, or financial) and tailor their efforts accordingly. While informational

assistance can be managed through digital materials or websites, experiential assistance, which involves developing and maintaining relationships through international missions and trade fairs, is particularly valuable and should be more frequently offered.

Governments should also focus on providing financial assistance to SMEs during the early stages of internationalization, given their limited resources. Policymakers play a crucial role in stimulating international business activity through export assistance programs. Effective management of these programs requires tailoring assistance to the specific level of internationalization of exporters, optimizing resources, and avoiding redundant basic information for more experienced exporters. Additionally, ensuring fast and reliable internet access, providing training in digital skills and e-commerce, and developing social media and foreign language skills can help exporters overcome barriers and access international markets more effectively.

Conclusions

The present study confirmed the findings about the complexity of the internationalization process of SMEs. This dynamic process occurs through the diversity of approaches that includes a set of variables that facilitate the establishment of links between the company and international markets, which explains different empirical results obtained among researchers.

Our findings showed a significant positive influence between company size, company processes and marketing capabilities—particularly managerial—on export performance, and a negative relationship between the level of internationalization and export performance. This confirms that company size can potentially influence the more efficient management of resources. Exporters with higher value addition processes tend to achieve better export performance. Managerial marketing capabilities provide a competitive advantage in international markets. Additionally, it is crucial for firms to determine the optimal level of internationalization to maximize their benefits effectively.

Overall, the results from this research suggest that R & T Costa Rican exporters enhance their performance by leveraging highly specialized resources and strengthening their social, business, and institutional networks to create value in their internationalization process. These SMEs need to continue learning and addressing factors that limit their export performance, particularly by improving their global market presence, enhancing their online visibility through digital marketing, and obtaining certifications that ensure high quality, safety, and sustainability of their products—requirements for competing effectively in international markets.

Although this study enhances the understanding of the RBV and network approaches as frameworks for analyzing the influence of three multi-item constructs—level of internationalization, marketing capabilities, and export assistance—on export performance, further research is needed

to address its limitations. The number of observations used, while representative of the sector, is insufficient to identify significant effects conclusively. A larger sample size is required to strengthen the robustness of the proposed models.

This study employed a cross-sectional research design, which does not facilitate the analysis of dynamic and causal relationships between the variables. Future research should consider a longitudinal design to better understand these relationships over time. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the influence of organizational culture, managerial roles, technological advancements, and government policies on the internationalization process.

While this research focused specifically on the R & T sector in Costa Rica, further studies could explore the same sector or other sectors with the same potential of the R & T in emerging economies across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Such comparative research would provide a broader understanding of the factors influencing export performance in different contexts.

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